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**Critical Evaluation:**

Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* is a personal examination of bullfighting in Spain during the 1920's and 1930's. Hemingway began visiting Spain in the summer of 1923 and quickly became involved in the world of bullfighting. He stayed in the same hotels, ate in the same restaurants, and drank in the same bars as the matadors. He followed them as they performed in different cities. Eventually, he began making annual trips to Pamplona, where bullfights were held in connection with the religious festival of San Fermín. Pamplona became the setting for the climactic scenes of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Drawing on this background, Hemingway attempts in *Death in the Afternoon* to celebrate "the modern Spanish bullfight" and to explain it "both emotionally and practically" for an audience of Americans. Hemingway assumes that his readers may be disgusted by the idea of bullfighting, but wishes them to give him the opportunity to show them what it is all about before they arrive at a judgment.

*Death in the Afternoon* is more than a book about bullfighting, however. The book is as much a book about Ernest Hemingway as it is a book about bullfighting. It is filled with his perceptions, his experiences, and his way of looking at life. So much of the information given in the book is autobiographical that it must be read in order to understand the life of

**At a glance:****Author:** Ernest Hemingway**First Published:** 1932**Type of Work:** Autobiography**Genres:** [Criticism](#), [Nonfiction](#), [Memoir](#)**Subjects:** [Memory](#), [Manners or customs](#), [Social life](#), [Death or dying](#), [Heroes or heroism](#), [Rites or ceremonies](#), [Entertaining or entertainers](#), [Life and death](#), [Biography](#), [Spain or Spanish people](#), [Bullfighting or bullfighters](#)**Upgrade Membership**

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Hemingway.

Chapter 1 begins with a narration of Hemingway's own early experience with bullfighting. He reports that he first went to the bullfights because of the influence of Gertrude Stein. Before going, Hemingway says that he expected to be horrified by the killing of the horses in the ring during the bullfight. He went, however, because it served a goal of his writing. He was trying to learn how to "put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion you experienced."

With this goal in mind, Hemingway went to Spain to study the bullfights, but once there he found them to be so complicated and so compelling to him that he began to study bullfighting for its own sake.

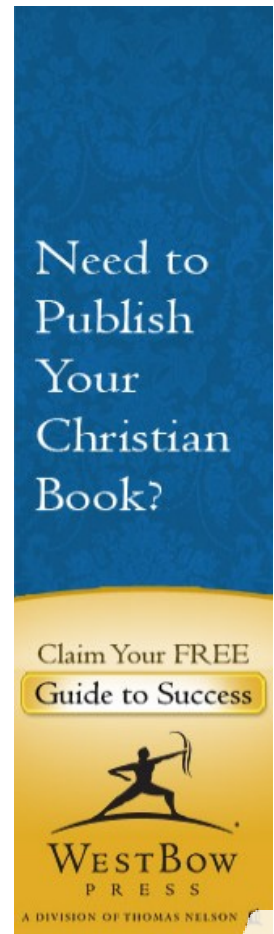
The rest of chapter 1 is an interesting mixture of essay and personal observation. Hemingway deals with the question of the morality of bullfighting by writing on the difference between people who identify psychologically with animals (and thus who think the bullfights are barbaric because bulls and frequently horses are killed) and people who identify with humans (and become upset only when the matador performs poorly or is injured). He deals with the question of the aesthetics of bullfighting by writing about how the enjoyment of the art of bullfighting increases in the same way that a person develops an ear for music or a sensitive palate for wine. The basic thread of the narrative is always bullfighting, but Hemingway cannot keep himself from engaging in asides, telling anecdotes, and making lengthy commentaries on other subjects. In this book on bullfighting, Hemingway is creating a persona that developed over the years into the voice of "Papa" Hemingway. In letters that Hemingway writes before *Death in the Afternoon* he often apologizes for the advice that he gives to family and friends, calling himself a Dutch uncle. At the time of the writing of *Death in the Afternoon*, he is beginning to stop apologizing. His tone throughout the book is one of a kindly, knowledgeable guide who knows what is best for the reader.

Hemingway was not an old man when he wrote *Death in the Afternoon*. He was relatively young. The arrogance that cost Hemingway many friends over the years is, in this book, beginning to show. There are passages in the book in which Hemingway sounds more like a bully than a kindly guide, and the overall impression that he gives of himself is that of a much older and much more experienced man. This arrogance is seen in an extreme degree in his attacks on other authors, which are sprinkled throughout the book. Hemingway suggests that some writers write the way they do because they are sexually frustrated; if they would take care of this problem, their writing would improve greatly. The book contains vicious asides about fellow writers such as William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley, André Gide, and Jean Cocteau. The book was widely condemned by critics for this meanness when it first appeared.

Hemingway also shows his fascination with technical trivia in *Death in the Afternoon*. Hemingway loved any type of activity that involves the complicated use of equipment. With bullfighting Hemingway was able to indulge this fascination to an extreme degree. His discussion of the various pieces of equipment and the techniques used in bullfighting takes up four chapters. Hemingway also demonstrates an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the bulls that are specifically bred for bullfights. He devotes another four chapters to a discussion of the size, weight, power, and mating habits of the bulls.

Another example of Hemingway's love for technical trivia is the book's series of appendices. One appendix contains sixty-four pages of black and white photos of bulls, bullfighters, fight techniques, and even of a horn wound on a matador's leg as it is being operated on. Hemingway includes detailed captions that explain the significance of each photo. Another appendix defines the meaning of hundreds of Spanish bullfighting terms, but also has whimsical entries on pickpockets, sodomites, and "tarts about town."

When *Death in the Afternoon* was first published, some critics accused Hemingway of padding the book with appendices that were of little use to the reader. Certainly, many of the appendices are very useful to the student of bullfighting, but some of them probably are padding. One appendix, for example, is nothing more than a series of notebook entries from Hemingway's Paris years about the reactions of his friends and family members (whom he does not identify by name) to their first bullfight.



In addition to Hemingway's evolving persona and his obsession with details, *Death in the Afternoon* also demonstrates the author's recurrent fascination with death. One of the book's major themes is the decadence of modern bullfighting, as opposed to the purity of bullfighting's earlier years. Decadence in bullfighting involves the matador's using tricks to appear to be a lot closer to the bull (and thus to danger and death) than he really is. The decadent matador causes the crowd of onlookers to feel an emotion that is false because he is really in no great danger.

True bullfighting, according to Hemingway, is something else. Bullfighting is not really a sport, since it is not an equal contest between man and bull. The drawing power of the fight is tragedy. The odds of the matador being killed are small. However, the competent matador can "increase the amount of danger of death that he runs" to the precise degree that he wishes. It is to the matador's credit if he deliberately attempts something that is extremely dangerous. It is to his dishonor if he does something dangerous through ignorance or torpidity. To Hemingway, that a man hazards death, while working at the limits of his skill to avoid it, makes a bullfight worth seeing.

Hemingway evaluates a number of bullfighters against the standard of their genuineness in hazarding death. He discusses great matadors of the past, such as Joselito and Belmonte, and bullfighters of his time, such as Sidney Franklin, the "pride of Brooklyn," an American who was trying to earn a living in Spain as a matador in the 1930's.

There are passages in the book in which Hemingway also seems intent on shocking his readers. He graphically describes the goring of bullfighters in the ring and the subsequent operations in hospitals. He includes one of his short stories, "A Natural History of the Dead," at the end of chapter 12.

The reader of *Death in the Afternoon* can learn a great deal of technical information about bullfighting. The greater appeal of this book is not what it teaches about bullfighting but rather what it teaches about a man who loved bulls, bullfights, matadors, and Spain: Ernest Hemingway.

In *Death in the Afternoon* Ernest Hemingway is encountered as a human being, without the veil of fiction. He is a writer at the height of his creative powers and at the height of his own arrogance. Hemingway shows his readers a clear picture of who he is by describing the things he loves and the things he hates. This picture is not always a flattering one. It contains his greatness, his pettiness, and his cruelty. The picture is, however, an extraordinarily accurate one. *Death in the Afternoon* must be read by anyone who wants to understand Ernest Hemingway.

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places in Spain that Hemingway visited and of Hemingway as a young man.

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